

URBAN ANTICS

Chook of the Bush



There are not as many flowers in the garden right now, but ohhh . . . what fragrance emanates from rain-washed peppermint, wattle and bottlebrush foliage. The air is heavy with an essence that brings tears to the eyes of old timers and beagle hounds.

While the night before was wrought with storm and destruction, the utter stillness of our typical wet winter morning sees shafts of sunlight, creating diamonds from dew drops against a background of wafting steam from waterlogged bark.

On the point of being totally besotted by such peace and tranquillity, it is usual then, to be rudely interrupted by a racket that would bemuse a sadistic sideshow spruiker. It's only our friendly family of wattlebirds with their cackling and squawking, pretending to be bossy-boot "chooks of the bush".

While there are some 10 000 living bird species in the world, some with beautiful voice and plumage, wattlebirds rate in that group described as . . . not very flash.

But, like my mum says, "it takes all kinds to make a world, and if you're into cacophonies of noise and scrawny beasts, then wattlebirds are beautiful.

In Australia, the genus *Anthochaera* contains three main wattlebird species, the large yellow wattlebird of Tasmania (*A. paradoxa*), the little wattlebird (*A. chrysoptera*) of south-eastern and south-western Australia, and the red wattle bird (*A. carunculata*) found across the whole of southern Australia.

Named from the lobes of skin, or wattles, on their cheeks, local red wattlebirds and the more sedentary but similar looking little wattlebirds (which, God only knows why, do not have wattles) are aggressive tree and shrub-living honeyeaters. They have four-pronged, brush-tipped tongues

for rifling nectar and pollen from flowers, and indulge in spectacularly fast, twisting and turning, beak snapping flights through branches in pursuit of other species. When interlopers have been driven off, a wattlebird may land on a branch, throw back its head and let forth a raucous collection of gurgling, coughing and vomiting sounds.

Of the entire local avian fauna, wattlebirds are very reptilian in appearance, with flat heads and rather scaly-looking plumage. Their flexible head and neck movements and the twisted positions enhance the resemblance to something saurian, especially when the birds probe into hanging blossoms. In flight, the long bill, stubby wings and tapering tail is somewhat strangely reminiscent of the ancient extinct *Archaeopteryx*.

Wattlebirds are versatile foragers, taking a variety of insects and fruit to support their energy requirements.

It is quite a startling event to see these birds as they verandah-hop to every conceivable crack and corner in brickwork, and then hawk under tiles looking for spiders and moths. It is equally amazing to observe a primeval habit, as they pounce upon large insects on road verges to kick and wrestle in a cloud of dust like a waring reptile.

While some people may be irked by the noise and antics of this ruffian of the shrubs, it provides the ultimate in garden animation and adornment. Live theatre at its best. Living with wattlebirds is a saga of surprises, with a never-ending story.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *The red wattlebirds of mainland Australia and the yellow wattlebirds of Tasmania used to be shot in large numbers for the table. Fortunately the species is now protected.*
- *Although having hoarse cries sounding like 'tobacco box, tobacco box', the sweet mellow ringing song of 'tew, tew, tew', by a female bird, is rudely injected with harsh deep 'choks' by the male in duet.*
- *In the breeding season, the young are fed solely on insects for some weeks after fledging.*

LANDSCOPE

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'Conserving the western ringtail possum' tells a story of rehabilitation, release and repopulation.



Discover the fascinating world of 'Starfish, Urchins and their Relatives' on page 10.



'The Art of Interpretation' on page 36 discusses how interpreters use a variety of techniques to enrich our experiences.



What have rabbits done to our land and what have we done about them? Find out in 'Run, Rabbit' on page 49.



Learn about a study of life in the tropical mudflats of Roebuck Bay on page 16.

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Computers and the Internet are putting CALM's Western Australian Herbarium within easy reach of researchers, students and wildflower enthusiasts. See 'From Here to Eternity' on page 40.

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